DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 533 CS 013 907

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| TITLE | Teaching All Children To Read: The Roles of the Reading Specialist. A Position Statement of the International Reading Association. |
| INSTITUTION | International Reading Association, Newark, DE. |
| PUB DATE | 2000-01-00 |
| NOTE | 13p. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, P.O. Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139 ($5 for 10 copies; single copies free). Tel: 800-336-7323 (Toll Free); Web site: http://www.reading.org. |
| PUB TYPE | Opinion Papers (120) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Elementary Education; Instructional Leadership; Professional Development; Reading Achievement; Reading Difficulties; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Teachers; *Specialists; Standards; Teacher Role |

ABSTRACT

Teaching all children to read requires that every child receive excellent reading instruction, and that children who are struggling with reading receive additional instruction from professionals specifically prepared to teach them. The range of student achievement found in classrooms, with the inclusion of children who have various physical, emotional, and educational needs, requires that educators move to different educational models from those of the past. These new models present opportunities for teachers and reading specialists to work collaboratively to provide effective instruction for all students. In order to provide these services, schools must have reading specialists who can provide expert instruction, assessment, and leadership for the reading program. Contains 11 references and 7 related resources available from the International Reading Association. (RS)

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# Teaching ALL CHILDREN to Read: The ROLES of the Reading Specialist

## A Position Statement of the International Reading Association

*Teaching all children to read requires that every child receive excellent reading instruction, and that children who are struggling with reading receive additional instruction from professionals specifically prepared to teach them. The range of student achievement found in classrooms, with the inclusion of children who have various physical, emotional, and educational needs, requires that we move to different educational models from those of the past. These new models present opportunities for teachers and reading specialists to work collaboratively to provide effective instruction for all students. In order to provide these services, schools must have reading specialists who can provide expert instruction, assessment, and leadership for the reading program.*

## Building the Case: Why Specialists?

One of the many recommendations that comes from the report of the National Research Council, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), directly focuses on the need for in-school specialists "who have specialized training related to addressing reading difficulties and who can give guidance to classroom teachers" (p. 333). The report recommends that schools without reading specialists reexamine their needs, because reading specialists provide leadership and instructional expertise for the prevention and remediation of reading difficulties. These conclusions of the National Research Council, formed in response to a growing concern about the need to provide excellent instruction so that all children can become successful readers, are based on the Council's analysis of research on reading and reading instruction. Building on this foundation, this position statement (a) explains why teaching all children to read depends on reading specialists, (b) identifies reading specialists, (c) defines the roles of reading specialists, and (d) comments on the preparation of reading specialists.

Schools today face a complex and difficult challenge. Classrooms are filled with children with diverse needs, from those who are strong and healthy to those who have emotional, physical, and learning problems; to those who come from high poverty backgrounds or diverse cultural backgrounds; to those who are English language learners struggling with learning to read. These challenges and the need for high levels of literacy, given our technological society, are increasing the demand for a highly competent teacher workforce prepared to address these issues (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). There is strong agreement that schools will succeed only when teachers have the expertise and competence needed to teach reading effectively (Pressley, 1998; Snow et al., 1998). Legislatures and teacher preparation institutions have increased the reading and language arts requirements for those

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who wish to become teachers, recognizing the need for expertise in this area. At the same time, there is recognition of the need for personnel with specialized knowledge about reading instruction who can provide essential services not only to students but to teachers whose diverse students present many challenges.

Where no instructional support exists, there appears to be an over-referral and inappropriate placement of children who have reading problems into special education programs (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). Many teachers feel overwhelmed with the tasks that face them, given the range of abilities and achievement in their classrooms. Too often, this daunting challenge leads to literacy instruction that might be improved with support from reading specialists.

There is also evidence that reading specialists are key factors in producing better reading achievement. Principals from exemplary schools that had reading specialists on staff indicated that these reading specialists were vital to the success of their reading programs (Bean, 1997). In Connecticut, two studies (Baron, 1999; Klein, Monti, Mulcahy-Ernt, & Speck, 1997) found that in comparable schools, students with reading consultants had higher reading test scores than those of students in schools without reading consultants. These results, along with the recommendation made by the National Research Council (Snow et al., 1998) about the importance of reading specialists, support the need for reading specialists as a means of enhancing students' reading performance.

## The Reading Specialist

The reading specialist is a professional with advanced preparation and experience in reading who has responsibility (i.e., providing instruction, serving as a resource to teachers) for the literacy performance of readers in general and of struggling readers in particular. Such individuals may work at one or more of the following levels—early childhood, elementary, middle, secondary, or adult learners—and in various settings—public, private, or commercial schools; reading resource centers, or clinics.

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The publication *Standards for Reading Professionals* (International Reading Association, 1998) provides a comprehensive list of proficiencies for the reading specialist. This list provides a baseline for thinking about reading specialists and how their roles differ from their roles in the past and from those of other literacy professionals. Specifically, reading specialists must possess the appropriate graduate education credentials, certificates, or degrees required by their state education body and demonstrate the proficiencies listed in the *Standards*. Although teachers may learn a great deal from taking various workshops or courses related to literacy, the role of specialist requires an integrated, sustained, and rigorous preparation program. To protect the integrity of the reading specialist position, all individuals in such a position should have advanced graduate preparation and appropriate educational credentials. Reading specialists should have prior classroom experience as a means of developing a more thorough understanding of classroom instruction and a better sense of and appreciation for the classroom teacher's role, as well as for establishing the credibility necessary for a reading specialist.

Although the majority of reading specialists work in elementary schools, these specialists also serve an important role in middle schools and secondary schools. At these levels, specialists must work with content teachers to assist them in building a better understanding of the relevance of reading to their discipline, how to use their textbooks effectively, and how to implement effective literary strategies. These specialists also need to be aware of how to help students become motivated, strategic, and independent learners.

Specialists involved in adult literacy will need to have a special understanding of their adult students as well as the proficiencies of all reading specialists. Adults bring to the instructional setting many problems and attitudes about reading that influence the nature of instruction.

Reading specialists also work in private reading clinics and community tutoring centers. In these settings, reading specialists should work closely with classroom teachers or volunteers to reinforce and support effective classroom instruction. It is important that students have a coherent and congruent reading program, and communication between those responsible for providing reading instruction is of critical importance.


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# Roles of the Reading Specialist

Reading specialists can assume multiple roles in schools, depending on the needs of the student population and teachers in the district. In fact, the role of the reading specialist can be seen on a continuum, with some specialists working primarily in a teaching role with students, while others spend the majority of their time in professional development with classroom teachers in a more formal leadership role. However, all specialists, regardless of role, must be involved in supporting the work of the classroom teacher and in developing the reading program so that it is effective for all students.

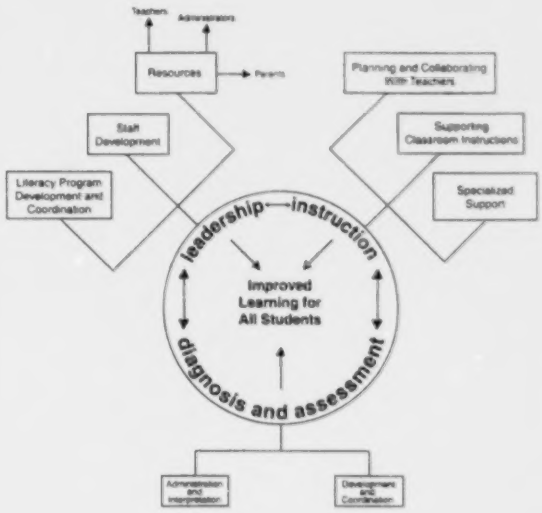
The major roles of reading specialists, each of which contributes to the improvement of student learning, are instruction, assessment, and leadership. The Figure in the next column illustrates the synergistic nature of these roles; each contributes to the other and all contribute to increased learning for all students.

*Instruction*

In the past, reading specialists have generally been viewed as educators who work with children who are struggling readers, supplementing or supplanting the work of the classroom teacher. Today, new roles are necessary. What appears to be most effective is for the reading specialist's instruction to support, supplement, and extend excellent classroom teaching (Pikulski, 1994). Such a view calls for the specialist and classroom teacher to work collaboratively to implement a quality reading program that is research-based and meets the needs of students. Then the classroom teacher and reading specialist can align instruction so that the teaching is congruent and of high quality (Allington & Walmsley 1995; Kennedy, Birman, & Demaline, 1986). These professionals can and must communicate with each other and with others (parents or other specialized personnel, such as the special education teacher or

counselor) about instruction.

In order to promote congruency, collaboration, and communication between classroom teachers and reading specialists, the instruction provided by the reading specialist may take place in the classroom. This approach has merit because it stresses the importance of a coordinated instructional approach. On the other hand, there are programs in which the specialist provides instruction outside the classroom. This may occur when the child requires specialized and individualized instruction, for example, for Reading Recovery instruction. A well-coordinated, congruent, and quality program can occur whether the reading specialist functions in the classroom or in a pullout setting.




*Assessment*

Reading specialists have specialized knowledge of assessment and diagnosis that is vital for developing, implementing, and evaluating the literacy program in general, and in designing instruction for individual students. Reading specialists can assess the reading strengths and needs of students and provide that information to classroom teachers, parents, and specialized personnel such as psychologists, special educators, or speech teachers in order

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to provide an effective reading program.

Such assessment does not necessarily require extensive formal testing. Rather, it may include observing the child in the classroom, discussing results of various classroom assessment measures with the teacher, or working with a child to determine how he or she responds to various literacy tasks. The specialist collaborates with the classroom teacher to use assessment results to plan and implement an appropriate reading program for the child.

Reading specialists also may have an important role in coordinating efforts related to district or state standards. These standards often require the development and implementation of various assessment tools. Specialists may need to work with teachers in the development of rubrics and alternative measures for assessing literacy and for instructional decision making. Moreover, reading specialists can be an important resource in assisting teachers in learning how to administer or interpret assessment results.

*Leadership*

The leadership role is multidimensional. All reading specialists need to be a resource to other educators, parents, and the community. They also aid teachers by suggesting ideas, strategies, or materials that can enhance instruction. They play an essential role in supporting individual teachers—especially new teachers—and administrators in becoming more knowledgeable about the teaching of reading. They lead professional development workshops, model strategies or techniques for teachers, and conduct demonstration or collaborative lessons. They also serve as a resource to other specialized personnel by serving on instructional support or student personnel teams. They are aware of the characteristics of adult learners and they understand how learning proceeds across the life span, and they have excellent interpersonal skills. They have an important role in building good home-school connections, both through their work with parents and in helping teachers to establish effective parent-teacher relationships. The reading specialist also is involved in providing instructional guidance to aides, volun-



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teer tutors, or paraprofessionals who may be working in the classroom to assist the teacher in meeting the needs of students. Such guidance is critical, though frequently such personnel are not used appropriately.

Reading specialists have a strong influence on the overall reading program in the school. When schools designate reading specialists to assume this type of leadership role, there appears to be a strong, positive influence on the reading achievement of students (Klein et al., 1997). Such specialists become change agents who work with teachers to create total school reform. Specialists in this position have a major responsibility for coordinating and providing leadership for the schoolwide literacy program, including the selection of materials and the development of curriculum. They provide professional development for school staff so that teachers are aware of current strategies and techniques for teaching literacy. As leaders, reading specialists must know sources of funding that might be available to enhance the literacy program and be able to write proposals for obtaining such grants.

As school leaders, reading specialists must serve as advocates for the literacy program. They will need to communicate with many different audiences including school boards, parents, and community agencies. Thus, they must be able to articulate the schoolwide reading program to others. Some reading specialists also may be involved in teacher supervision, which necessitates skill in observing and conferring with teachers. These specialists often are designated as district reading supervisors or coordinators and have responsibility for evaluating the district reading program and its outcomes. They then may be responsible for professional development of other specialists on staff. Because so many reading specialist positions are funded by Title I, specialists in leadership positions may be responsible for administering the Title I program and for facilitating the work of other reading specialists in the district.

## Preparing Reading Specialists

*Standards for Reading Professionals* (1998) provides

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## Preparing Reading Specialists

*Standards for Reading Professionals* (1998) provides essential information about the qualifications necessary for reading specialists. The document requires that reading specialists, as well as all literacy professionals, have proficiency in three broad categories: knowledge and beliefs about reading, instruction and assessment, and organizing and enhancing a reading program. The document stresses the importance of knowledge and understanding of reading as well as the ability to communicate and collaborate with others so that such knowledge is transferred to classroom practice. As part of the specialist preparation program, reading specialists must complete a clinical practicum in which they work with students with reading difficulties. A practicum experience that includes working with adult learners also is recommended. Further, *Standards for Reading Professionals* also emphasizes the need for leadership capabilities, requiring institutions to include experiences that will enable specialist candidates to develop such skills. In the *Standards*, each of the major categories is described in depth so that institutions responsible for preparing reading specialists can obtain explicit information related to preparation.

## Recommendation

Given the U.S. agenda for improving the literacy performance of students and the increasing demands for educating all students to achieve at high levels, it is essential that schools have the personnel best prepared to address these challenges. Such personnel must include a qualified reading specialist as a core member of the educational team. The International Reading Association agrees with U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley, who stated, "Every elementary school should have the reading specialists they need to make a difference" (1999). To this, however, we would add that middle schools and high schools should have the same instructional support, because effective reading instruction must be guided by reading specialists across all grade levels.

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## Related Resources Available From the International Reading Association

*Building a Knowledge Base in Reading*
Jane Braunger, Jan Patricia Lewis 1997

*Literacy Instruction for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students: A Collection of Articles and Commentaries*
Michael F. Opitz, Editor 1998

*Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success*
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